

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

WHAT IS PTSD?

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can occur following the experience or witnessing of a traumatic event. A traumatic event is a life-threatening event such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, serious accidents, or physical or sexual assault in adult or childhood. Most survivors of trauma return to normal given a little time. However, some people will have stress reactions that do not go away on their own, or may even get worse over time. These individuals may develop PTSD.

People with PTSD experience three different kinds of symptoms. The first set of symptoms involves reliving the trauma in some way such as becoming upset when confronted with a traumatic reminder or thinking about the trauma when you are trying to do something else. The second set of symptoms involves either staying away from places or people that remind you of the trauma, isolating from other people, or feeling numb. The third set of symptoms includes things such as feeling on guard, irritable, or startling easily.

In addition to the symptoms described above, we now know that there are clear biological changes that are associated with PTSD. PTSD is complicated by the fact that people with PTSD often may develop additional disorders such as depression, substance abuse, problems of memory and cognition, and other problems of physical and mental health. These problems may lead to impairment of the person's ability to function in social or family life, including occupational instability, marital problems and family problems.

PTSD can be treated with psychotherapy ('talk' therapy) and medicines such as antidepressants. Early treatment is important and may help reduce long-term symptoms. Unfortunately, many people do not know that they have PTSD or do not seek treatment. This fact sheet will help you to better understand PTSD and the how it can be treated.

HOW DOES PTSD DEVELOP?

PTSD develops in response to a traumatic event. About 60% of men and 50% of women experience a traumatic event in their lifetime. Most people who are exposed to a traumatic event will have some of the symptoms of PTSD in the days and weeks after the event. For some people these symptoms are more severe and long lasting. The reasons why some people develop PTSD are still being studied. There are biological, psychological and social factors that affect the development of PTSD.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF PTSD?

Although PTSD symptoms can begin right after a traumatic event, PTSD is not diagnosed unless the symptoms last for at least one month, and either cause significant distress or interfere with work or home life. In order to be diagnosed with PTSD, a person must have three different types of symptoms: re-experiencing symptoms, avoidance and numbing symptoms, and arousal symptoms.

RE-EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS

Re-experiencing symptoms are symptoms that involve reliving the traumatic event. There are a number of ways in which people may relive a trauma. They may have upsetting memories of the traumatic event. These memories can come back when they are not expecting them. At other times the memories may be triggered by a traumatic reminder such as when a combat veteran hears a car backfire, a motor vehicle accident victim drives by a car accident or a rape victim sees a news report of a recent sexual assault. These memories can cause both emotional and physical reactions. Sometimes these memories can feel so real it is as if the event is actually happening again. This is called a "flashback." Reliving the event may cause intense feelings of fear, helplessness, and horror similar to the feelings they had when the event took place.

AVOIDANCE AND NUMBING SYMPTOMS

Avoidance symptoms are efforts people make to avoid the traumatic event. Individuals with PTSD may try to avoid situations that trigger memories of the traumatic event. They may avoid going near places where the trauma occurred or seeing TV programs or news reports about similar events. They may avoid other sights, sounds, smells, or people that are reminders of the traumatic event. Some people find that they try and distract themselves as one way to avoid thinking about the traumatic event.

Numbing symptoms are another way to avoid the traumatic event. Individuals with PTSD may find it difficult to be in touch with their feelings or express emotions toward other people. For example, they may feel emotionally "numb" and may isolate from others. They may be less interested in activities you once enjoyed. Some people forget, or are unable to talk about, important parts of the event. Some think that they will have a shortened life span or will not reach personal goals such as having a career or family.

AROUSAL SYMPTOMS


People with PTSD may feel constantly alert after the traumatic event. This is known as increased emotional arousal, and it can cause difficulty sleeping, outbursts of anger or irritability, and difficulty concentrating. They may find that they are constantly 'on guard' and on the lookout for signs of danger. They may also find that they get startled.

OTHER PROBLEMS

It is very common for other conditions to occur along with PTSD, such as depression, anxiety, or substance abuse. More than half of men with PTSD also have problems with alcohol. The next most common co-occurring problems in men are depression, followed by conduct disorder, and then problems with drugs. In women, the most common co-occurring problem is depression. Just under half of women with PTSD also experience depression. The next most common co-occurring problems in women are specific fears, social anxiety, and then problems with alcohol. People with PTSD often have problems functioning. In general, people with PTSD have more unemployment, divorce or separation, spouse abuse and chance of being fired than people without PTSD. Veterans with PTSD were found to have many problems with family and other interpersonal relationships, problems with employment, and increased incidents of violence. People with PTSD also may experience a wide variety of physical symptoms. This is a common occurrence in people who have depression and other anxiety disorders.

RECOVERY

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, almost everyone will find themselves unable to stop thinking about what happened. Many will also exhibit high levels of arousal. For most, fear, anxiety, remembering, efforts to avoid reminders, and arousal symptoms, if present, will gradually decrease over time. Use your personal support systems, family and friends, when you are ready to talk. Recovery is an ongoing gradual process. It doesn't happen through suddenly being "cured" and it doesn't mean that you will forget what happened. But, most people will recover from trauma naturally over time. If your emotional reactions are getting in the way of your relationships, work, or other important activities, take the time to see a counselor at the UW-L Counseling & Testing Center.



THE UWL COUNSELING
AND TESTING CENTER
STAFF ARE AVAILABLE
TO HELP THOSE STUDENTS WHO
ARE DEALING WITH PTSD AND
OTHER LIFE ISSUES. CALL
(608)785-8073 TO MAKE AN
APPOINTMENT TO TALK WITH A
COUNSELOR.